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ABSTRACT

To understand television in relation to the issue of children and violent programming, three broad areas must be examined: the child, the parent or primary caretaker, and the medium. Concerning the child, parents should not simply negatively restrict their children's viewing, but should view television with their children and critically discuss the content of programs viewed. Concerning the parent or caregiver, adults should understand that what they do makes a difference; children should not be allowed to become uncritical, unquestioning consumers of television programming. Concerning the medium of television, even though television programs are not the sole determinants of behavioral effects--such as aggression--in children, what children watch does make a difference and what parents/caregivers prohibit matters as well. To help children become competent viewers, adults need to assume that what they do with television is as important as what television does with them. They should discourage public acceptance of objectionable programs, write television stations and government officials, change the channel, and confront the networks, local stations, and the Federal Communications Commission. Most importantly, they should watch television with their children, in order to understand how their child understands television and to develop his or her critical viewing skills. Don't simply turn it off. (RH)

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OUR TELEVISIONS. OUR SELVES

Some Thoughts on Children and Televised Violence

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OUR TELEVISIONS, OUR SELVES: Some Thoughts on Children and Televised Violence

Introduction

Having conducted a number of different workshops on children and televised violence with parents, teachers and child-care workers, we have heard a variety of concerns that center on the potential or actual effects of television on children's behaviors. Just a few examples of these concerns are:

> "I'm afraid that television is making my kids more violent."
>
> "I think shows like the A-Team make kids more apt to fight with one another."
>
> "I'm concerned about letting my toddler watch cartoons. There seems to be a lot more violence in these kid's shows than in adult programs."
>
> "I don't want my kid exposed to violence of any kind."

If you think about these concerns and beliefs, you might notice that they all have at least one thing in common; the focus is on content, the television programming itself, rather than on people, on the individuals who watch the programming on television. But, since individual children are, of course, unique, it may

be wise to take a step back and to re-examine the familiar assumption that television does things to people, and to think about what people (both children and adults) do with television.

Just as preferences for certain types of programs on television differ from one person to the next, so do the behaviors that develop in the face of television content. The diversity of needs that draw people to watch television, the many different programs offered, and the various meanings ascribed to a given image or event are all evidence that what we generally assume to be a simple (even mindless) activity is actually quite complex. When someone watches television, there is much more than a program to consider, there is an individual, a human being. As human beings, we sense that we do not fit perfectly into this group or that -- we are individuals. This is no less the case for children -- they, too, should not be reduced to a "statistic." Yet traditional studies of the effects of televised violence on children offer little more than such reductions, at least as such research is often reported to the more general public. And in most cases, members of the general public, those who are the most intimately concerned about such issues, rarely receive adequate information about just what is being done to improve the quality of, or to simply better understand, their lives.

It would be inaccurate (if not unethical) for us to pretend that we know how a given child will behave under certain conditions. Complex behavior (like TV viewing) is not predictable. Ever. What we can do, though, is point to the most important factors

that are involved in the child-television pairing. If you can increase your understanding of these areas (factors) and how they interact, you will have taken the first step towards understanding how your children relate to television, and how their behaviors are iniated by both television and the larger world in which they live.

Our Televisions, Our Selves

> Americans receive decidedly more of their education from television than from elementary and high schools. By the time the average child enters kindergarten he [or she] has already spent more hours learning about his [or her] world from television than the hours he [or she] would spend in a college classroom earning a B.A. degree.
>
> Nicholas Johnson
> Former FCC Commissioner

Following a television screening of The Deer Hunter, at least 29 viewers in the United States shot themselves in an apparent imitation of the film's Russian-roulette scene. Were these shootings acts of violence? Certainly. Were they related to a mass mediated influence? Clearly. Were they the result of that influence? No. It is in answering this last question -- the question of direct effects -- that most of our students and workshop participants become discouraged. On the one hand, we know that television is a powerful force in all of our lives, even if we watch little of it. It is, in fact, the single most dominant aspect of contemporary American culture. While it may appear paradoxical, then, it is true that television, in and of itself, causes nothing and influences everything.

We feel that, ultimately, television's true "power" involves this ubiquitous nature -- it is everywhere, all of the time. In fact, more households in the United States have television sets than have refrigerators or indoor plumbing! Television enters into every facet of our society, and every facet of our society may become the content of television. As Chester Pierce remarks in his anthology, Television and Education:

> It is not surprising that a plethora of subjects will be touched upon in a consideration of television because television itself embraces, as its province, the whole of human aspiration, achievement, endeavor, desire and wish.

To understand this complex phenomenon as it concerns the particularly problematic issue of children and violent programming, we need to examine the television viewing process in terms of three broad areas: The child, the parent (or primary caretaker) and the medium.

The Child

Some children have attempted Superman-like "leaps from tall buildings." Other (in fact, most) children have not made such attempts. And yet, the same super-hero cartoons and serials are televised into each child's home. What is significant, therefore, is not only the content of the program, but the "content" of the child.

For example, television is often incorrectly used as a scape-goat, as some parents and educators approach their children's use of the medium with what we call a "corruptive presumption." The presumption is "corruptive" in that such

adults simply assume that TV is harmful or "bad" for their children and it is "corruptive" in that we suspect that such assumptions may have unexpected "negative" consequences of their own. If you (even unintentionally) foster an uncritical, over-generalized negativity toward television in your home (or in your child), this, in itself, will probably not inhibit viewing. But, when your child does view, the attitude you created might possibly lead to the very negative consequences you assume to exist or, at the very least, inhibit any positive ones. Perhaps an analogy to another "taboo activity" will help clarify this particular notion.

All sexually maturing children will engage in some form of masturbation, whether or not their parents "approve." But those children who have been taught to feel "guilty" about masturbating are more likely to experience uneccesary anxiety and, in extreme cases, develop serious psychopathologies. In such cases, indeed, masturbation does become a bad thing. But only inasmuch as these children's parents or other caretakers have made it so. Television viewing, in general, is not so different. Children who approach the medium with a pre-formed anxiety about it are less likely to engage in creative or prosocial viewing. And though our research in this area is both tentative and speculative at this point, we suspect that children who are taught to expect harm from a relatively neutral stimulus will, indeed, be harmed. In this case, simply telling your child that television is "bad" is as about as

effective as telling him or her that masturbation is "wrong." A more positive approach is clearly indicated, and we will outline some steps in that direction later in this article.

To return to our Superman example once again: What makes some children jump while others do not? Obviously, we cannot answer this question in any detail. If a particular child is somehow predisposed to violence (or even suicidal), an accurate assesment of that child's behavioral-psychological makeup would require much more than an analysis of his or her television viewing habits, important as those habits are. But this phenomenon does illustrate one of the most fundamental "truths" we have learned about human communication in general, and mass communication in particular. Dean Barnlund, Professor of Speech Communication at San Francisco State University, reminds us that while messages are generated from the "outside" (as in a TV program like Superman), meaning is generated from "within," by each individual who receives the message. The message may be the same for every individual, but for every individual the meaning will be unique. This is one of the reasons that coviewing -- adults (parents) and children viewing together -- is so important. It is only through dialogue that we can share such unique meanings, that we can come to know each other's "interior worlds." As such, it is simply not enough to tell your child "Do watch this" or "Don't watch that." Doing so allows you a degree of control over what messages your child is exposed to, not what meaning he or she gains from those messages.

To attain a level of understanding, there is no substitute for direct, involved interaction with your children. The concept of coviewing is important enough that we will return to it again later. Now, however, we move on to the second of our broad areas, the parent.

The Parent (or Primary Caretaker)

If your child appears overly aggresive, The A-Team is not to blame. Indeed, such violent programming does encourage violent behavior -- but it will neither cause nor eliminate it. Such "prevention" usually, but not always, resides with the parent.

Even though the realities of today's world (single-parent households, families in which both parents must work, and the like) make very difficult demands upon parents, demands that surely leave them with less time than they would like to spend with their children, parents who are concerned about their children's emotional and social development must accept some responsibility for affecting how their children develop. Parental influence necessarily extends to all areas of this development, including the influences that television has on such growth.

As we've said, we do not advocate an overgeneralized parental negativity (even hostility) toward television, especially as it concerns children's usage. Still, we also cannot support an uncritical, unquestioning acceptance of television in the home. We fully sympathize with the exhausted working mother

who, now and then, uses television as an "electronic babysitter." That, certainly, is a benign use of a modern technology. But we can't conceive of any circumstance that would justify literally rearing children on the medium. Edward Whetmore, Professor of Communication Arts at the University of San Francisco, points out that younger parents seem particularly less concerned about television in their children's lives, as they themselves grew up with TV: " 'After all,' they say, 'we watched TV all the time, and we turned out all right.' What they may not realize is how much of what they are now is a product of that small screen."

How can a busy caretaker find the time to help children to understand television in a positive way? This will be discussed in more detail later. But, all concerns about "what to do" must be based on the acceptance of a very important reality: PARENTS AND CARETAKERS DO MAKE A DIFFERENCE! Whether you like it or not, you are one of the key "parts" of your child's television reality, and your behaviors play a very important role in determining when and how your children will be affected by programs on television. Still, along with your children and you comes the television itself, with all its commercials, cartoons, situation comedies, music videos and other offerings that it brings into your home on a daily basis.

The Television

Even though TV programs are not the sole determinants of behavioral effects, what your children watch does make a

difference. And, what you prohibit your children from viewing matters as well. If you accept the idea that content alone does not create effects, then maybe you can think about TV programs in ways that are a little bit different from your earlier ideas. For example, no content warrants censorship. Also, since complete avoidance of televised content is impossible (Don't you know about some programs that you have never seen?), it is essential that you prepare your children for the world of television that exists outside of the home environment. What is more, you need to be sensitive to your child's ability to engage in peer interaction. Ultimately, we assume that what children talk about is not more important than the fact that they do talk, that they develop interpersonally amongst themselves. When you deny your child access to television -- or movies, radio, records and so on -- you deny your child access to his or her own culture. That culture may seem of little importance to you, but, literally, it "means the world" (is the world) to your child.

Once again, we stress that you must adopt a process-oriented approach to television viewing. Simply stated, you need to assume that what you do with television is as important (and in some cases more important) as what television does with you. Yet, you might say that you've tried to raise your child in a relatively peace-oriented environment, helped him or her to watch television with a questioning, informed (critical) eye, and, still, you are disturbed by Rambo and G. I. Joe cartoons and their counterparts

in situation comedies, dramas and, even, toys. This is certainly understandable. For even if it were possible to "shield" your child from such programming, as we've said, his or her friends watch, often leaving your child in the position of having to deal indirectly with this content. Rather than discourage personal viewing (which, of course, you can do), you can make efforts to discourage public acceptance of objectionable programs. You can't influence the nation, but you can influence your neighbors -- and your child can influence your neighbor's children.

If something on television offends you, speak up about it! Let others know what you think and, most especially, let your children know what you think, even as you ask them for their own opinions about television. Look at television viewing as an opportunity to learn, to seek out new experiences and to think about them in different, even creative, ways.

Additionally, you can write to television stations and government officials. The television stations in your city are licensed by the federal government, as <u>your</u> representative, to ensure that they operate in the public's interest, convenience and necessity. Broadcast stations still make use of the <u>public</u> airwaves in order to send you their programming. Since these airwaves have traditionally been considered limited resources, broadcasters are not allowed to own them, only to use them for a specified period of time according to the guidelines issued by the licensing agency (the FCC). Your local TV station has every right to own, exclusively, all the tubes, antennas and

cameras it wants. but, it can't broadcast a thing without first being licensed to do so. As such, you have a political say regarding what gets sent into your home.

Beyond that, you also have a "practical say" in this matter. It is important to remember that television, at least as we know it today, exists primarily to sell a product. We are not refering to underarm deordorants or brands of plastic wrap. The product that TV exists to sell is you. Commercial stations pay a high price to keep careful tabs on who is watching, when and (to a limited extent) why. For example, one TV station may find, through a ratings service, that many women between the ages of 25 and 54 watch its programs between 3:00 and 5:00 PM during the weekdays. That particular audience will, in turn, be sold (by making ad time available) to advertisers trying to reach this segment of the viewing public. Without you -- and millions like you, to be sure -- there would be no "product" for commercial stations to sell (the situation is somewhat different, of course, for cable and noncommercial services, though they too exist to create audiences). More simply stated, your viewing choices are "votes" of a sort for the television programs from which we all select. And, as in politics, bad "candidates" seem to get as readily elected as good ones. It is an old-but-true axiom: If you don't like it, then don't watch it. That, very simply, is the least you can not do. But that, in itself, will hardly get you the kind of programming you might desire. What, in a more positive way, can you do?

Confronting the Networks, Local Stations and the FCC

As we've already noted, you should make known your ideas and concerns about television. Beyond your neighbors and friends, you may feel compelled to provide the program providers with your opinions. While writing a letter may not produce changes overnight (particularly in the face of current industry deregulation), television stations, especially smaller local stations, do take your views seriously. Someone will read your letter and respond to it.

Of course, you need to take the time to seriously consider what point you want to make and how best to express yourself. It would do very little good, for example, to address a letter to "Station Manager" stating that you feel some programs are "too violent for kids." First, a letter addressed to a specific individual is always more effective than a letter addressed to an ambiguous position or job title. Second, when writing a station, you should be as precise as you can; "too violent for kids" is too vague to merit a serious response. List exactly what offended you, when it was broadcast and, most importantly, why you found it objectionable. You may also wish to send a copy of your letter to your local newspaper's opinion page editor or to a relevant newsletter. Finally, if you are a member of a community organization, you may wish to send some sort of "group letter."

Of course, it is important that you be reasonable. You and your children are not the only TV viewers in your city and, difficult though it may be, you need to maintain a degree of

genuine respect for the taste (or distaste) of others. Your opinions will carry more weight if they reflect an informed awareness of what others may or may not want or need in the way of television programming.

These same general guidelines apply to letters you might write to producers, performers, magazines or the Federal Communications Commission (or FCC). You can find the address for the FCC, the major networks and local TV and radio stations in an annual publication, Broadcasting/Cablecasting Yearbook. The reference sections of most libraries (especially university libraries) carry this publication. Relatively easy to use, this reference book will provide you with all the names and addresses you need, as well as a brief introduction to American broadcasting and how it is regulated.

The Importance of Coviewing and Critical Viewing Skills

You obviously can't do everything your child does, and such "over-participation" in a child's life is not even advisable were it possible. Still, it is important that you spend time watching television with your children. Coviewing will allow you to understand how your child understands TV. Indeed, watching television with a child should not simply provide an adult with the opportunity to tell a child what is or is not so, what is wrong or right, and so on. Children may perceive television differently than adults, but that does not mean that they fail to perceive anything significant. Furthermore, you need to be sensitive to your own child's language abilities. Children

often understand things that they cannot express verbally. Likewise , the questions adults pose to children may be understood differently by each. Many an adult has been dismayed after pointing to the TV screen and asking their eight year old, "Is that real?" Some children respond, "yes." But we have found that often the answer indicates that the question itself is too vague, not that the child is confused. A "yes" response could, for example, mean that the child knows that he or she is seeing a "real" television program on a "real" TV and that, at least in the context of the viewing situation, both "really" exist. What do we expect children to say? "No, that TV set and that program we are both watching does not really exist ."? As adults, we need to be aware of the child-centered meanings our questions may evoke. Hopefully, watching television with your child will provide you with an opportunity to truly interact with each other about a variety of ideas, events and people that neither of you would likely be exposed to in any other way.

At this point, we need to make what may, at first, seem to be a radical suggestion. If you are concerned about violence on television, don't just stop watching. As we've said, TV can't really be avoided, and we see no reason why it should be. Still, there are many parents and "educators" who feel that with television, less is always better. While anything done to excess is usually harmful, you do need to watch television in order to understand and use it effectively. Just as an illiterate adult cannot teach a child to read, a parent who does not watch

television can offer nothing in the way of teaching critical viewing skills. This is true not only for TV in general, but also for the special issue of television violence.

We suspect that it is no more advisable that children be raised in an excessively violent environment than it is that they be raised in a violence-free one. Children (and adults) need to come to the understanding that while peace is most valuable and certainly attainable, tragedy is inevitable, and not a value-less part of the human experience. A child shielded from violence of any kind will be no more equipped to live out a full human life than a child exposed to almost nothing but pain and suffering. Noted psychologist Rollo May has observed that:

> Tragedy is inseparably connected with the human being's dignity and grandeur, and is the accompaniment, as illustrated in the dramas of Oedipus and Orestes and Hamlet and Macbeth, of the person's moments of greatest insight.

Now, of course, TV content often lacks the substance of Macbeth, but it too has its "moments." Some television violence, as tragedy, might be useful as a means for you and your children to explore, and perhaps understand more fully, this important aspect of life.[1]

Finally, there are a wide variety of publications available that recommend games and other activities you and your children could use in developing viewing skills. Most useful are the viewing guides that the public relations departments of many networks issue for important programs (such as An Early Frost). These guides allow you to discuss program content prior to viewing and can be obtained by writing the network or its local

affiliate. Of course, pre-broadcast reviews printed in your local paper will also serve a similar function, and should not be entirely ignored.

By and large, however, we have found little value in the excercises included in books and pamphlets concerning children and television. They often involve rather trite activities, such as keeping a "media log" listing hours of viewing and so on. Such "games" are enough to bore an adult; they are an outright insult to a child's sense of creativity and imagination. You know your children well enough (we hope) to devise your own TV-related activities that will allow you to explore television's role in your family's life.

However, we do strongly recommend that any child old enough to read be taught how to use TV Guide (or some equivalent). This will help your child understand that he or she has choices (limited though they may be) and decisions to make with reagrd to television viewing. Children need to understand as early as possible that they can plan their viewing, and that they can do such planning in both satisfactory and unsatisfactory ways. Being able to use TV Guide will also help to "de-mystify" television for your child, at least inasmuch as it will allow him or her to understand that the medium is not an unmanageable, seemingly endless flow of disconnected imagery. If you work with groups of children, you can save old guides and use them in an instructional context. Children need to know how to use such guides just as much as they need to know how to use a dictionary or encyclopedia. Program listings will help

instill in your child a sense of control over the medium, which is as it should be.

Conclusion

As you can see, there are no easy "answers" to the "problems" of televised violence. But the simple fact that you are concerned about this important area suggests that you have, in fact, already taken a most significant step in the proverbial right direction. Indeed, as educators and social scientists we are committed to the notion that each of us can be an autonomous thinker, capable of coming to understand our own lives, our own "beings" and varied realities, and that it is only in understanding them that we begin to most fully live them out.

> To see viewers as seekers, not as passive people to entertain, will help all those who are looking for ways to use this gift of a medium...
>
> Caleb Gattegno
> Towards a Visual Culture

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

The following educational and lobbying organizations publish newsletters and other informational material relevant to the issues discussed in this article:

ooo Action for Children's Television (ACT)
46 Austin Street
Newtonville, MA 02160
(617) 527-7870

ooo National Black Media Coalition
516 U Street, N. W.
Washington, D.C 20001

ooo The National PTA TV Action Center
700 North Rush Street
Chicago, IL 60611

ooo People for the American Way
1901 Avenue of the Stars
Suite 666
Los Angeles, CA 90067

ooo Teachers' Guides to Television
699 Madison Avenue
New York, NY 10021

Additionally, the authors of this article may be contacted for further information:

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In addition to writing your local stations and newspapers, you can write to the networks and the FCC at the following addresses:

ooo American Broadcasting Company (ABC)
1330 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10019

ooo Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS)
51 West 52nd Street
New York, NY 10019

ooo National Broadcasting Company (NBC)
30 Rockefeller Plaza
New York, NY 10020

ooo Public Broadcasting System (PBS)
485 L'Efant Plaza West
Washington, D.C. 20024

ooo Federal Communications Commission (FCC)
1919 M Street, N. W.
Washington, D.C. 20554

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Some observations presented in this article stem from our own previous research:

Whetmore, E. J., & Kielwasser, A. P. (1983). The soap opera audience speaks: A preliminary report. Journal of American Culture, 6(3), 110-116.

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FOOT NOTE

[1]In fact, we are concerned that many parents and activist groups seem most worried about sex and violence on television while almost ignoring what seems, at least to us, to be the area for most concern: advertising. Television seems to encourage children, even at very young ages, to engage in ardent consumerism. This area, however, is outside of the content boundaries of the current article.

AUTHOR NOTES

MICHELLE A. WOLF (Ph.D., University of Texas at Austin) is Associate Professor of Broadcast Communication Arts at San Francisco State University. Her research has focused on studying media usage in natural settings and the development of non-traditional, qualitative research methods for understanding how children make sense of television. Currently, she is studying music subcultures in the United States and the social impact of new information technologies.

ALFRED P. KIELWASSER (M.A., San Francisco State University) has taught courses on the social-psychology of mass communication at San Francisco State University and the University of San Francisco. His research has focused on the appeal of dramatic serials and on the role of the self-concept in determining media effects. Currently, he is studying the interplay between human sexuality and mass communication,and the social-cognitive perceptions of television usage.